

Reading Habits at a Third World Technological University

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In common with all categories of student and professional, technologists need to keep up-to-date in their areas of specialisation by reading. A study was made of reading habits of students at a technological institution in Papua New Guinea to see what the extent of student reading was. It emerged that little was read in the professional areas unless lecturers tested students on required reading, and preferred reading was comics and fiction. The need to establish and encourage a reading habit in a country with only a recent written tradition is clearly essential, and some suggestions are given for ways tried to improve the situation.

BACKGROUND

It is a view commonly held by technologists that, the very nature of their subject being practical, they need to read less than other professions. Nevertheless they would be the first to defend themselves against a charge of not keeping abreast of their areas of specialisation, and in order to keep themselves up-to-date must of necessity read the latest publications to appear in their specialist fields, in both books and journals. A further means of updating is obtained through conferences, but the numbers able to attend these are inevitably much smaller than those reached through the printed word; furthermore, the most important contributions to conferences appear as published volumes or as individual papers in periodicals.

In order to determine what was the real extent of reading in a particular institution, a study was made of reading habits in a fairly typical third world institution, the Papua New Guinea University of Technology, which was founded as an Institute of Higher Technical Education in 1965, and assumed its present status in 1973. It is located in Lae, the second largest city in the country, which overall had a population of just over three million in the 1980 census. There is one other university in the country (located in the capital) with traditional arts, social science, pure science, law and medical disciplines. The University of Technology specialises in engineering, surveying, architecture and building, accountancy and business studies, forestry, and chemical and fisheries technology. Full-time student numbers in the two institutions are comparable at around 1,200.

The language used for the medium of education is English. Legal provision is made for the use of Pidgin and the vernaculars in primary education, but it is rarely taken up. The linguistic situation in Papua New Guinea is rather more fragmented than most third world countries, for there are more than 750 vernaculars, the most important of which, numerically, is only spoken by 150,000 people. There are two officially-recognised lingua franca — Pidgin and Hiri Motu — the latter having a very limited and decreasing spread. English is the language of government, education, and the armed forces, and is the key to success in business.

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Given the large number of vernaculars and the recent impact of education in a traditional and undeveloped rural society, the written tradition is lacking, and a need to foster the reading habit exists. Experiences differ, but in Oceania and to some extent in South-East Asia, it would seem that students rarely read unless they are required to.

CURRENT READING PREFERENCES IDENTIFIED BY THE STUDENTS

Questionnaires were completed by approximately one-third of the students (i.e., about 400) in the university in 1981. Most were completed by students in the early years of their university studies, since all students taking English completed them. Students in all professional courses were covered. Only full-time students were questioned.

The questionnaire dealt with current non-textbook reading, asked for an estimate of the number and kind of books read, enquired about respondents' use of the fiction and reference sections in the university library, and probed into the reading of newspapers and comics.

That 33% of the students did not answer the question "If you are now reading a book other than a textbook, what is its title?" suggested either that they did not remember the title exactly (which a further 1.3% admitted) or that they were not reading anything. Of those who were reading something, 35% were reading novels, 32% were reading professional or non-fiction books, 3.4% listed magazines or comics, and 29% did not answer. The distinction between 'professional' (i.e. study-related) and 'non-fiction' (non-study-related) was not perhaps clearly drawn in the students' minds, and even the term 'fiction' (to judge from some of the examples given of fiction by the students themselves) was not always clearly understood.

It should be pointed out that these figures erred on the side of being generous, because distortions occurred as a number of students when filling in the questionnaire were also required to write book reports as part of their English course, and the true picture of normal current reading might be less favourable.

32% of the students, by their own estimate, only read on average one book (including textbooks) a month, 20% read one book in two or three months, and nearly 8% (by not answering the question on reading frequency) seemed to indicate that they only read one book in more than three months, or less frequently than that. Only 11% estimated they read one book a week, and 29% one book in two weeks.

Students stated they mostly read fiction (67%), followed by comics, magazines and newspapers (22%). Only 18% mostly read professional books. However, although most students appeared to prefer fiction, 37% said they never used the fiction section in the library. It was to be assumed that a number of cheap paperbacks were in private circulation among students if both answers were true.

It was worrying to note that 27% of the students said they never used the reference section in the library and a further 17% used it less than once a month. Of those who had consulted reference books, 35% had done so most recently for the professional books it contained.

The students appeared to be fairly avid readers of local newspapers: 37% read the main newspaper daily, and 18% read the other daily newspaper.

Only one-fifth of the students said they did not read comics at all (15.5%) or implied

they did not (4.5%), by not answering the question relating to comic reading. The great majority of the university students, mostly aged between 18—26, therefore appeared to read comics fairly regularly, and 12% stated they preferred to read comics rather than any other form of printed matter. (Comics, of course, reinforce an oral not a written tradition, and hardly constitute good models for formal writing.) 20% stated they preferred to read professional books and 46% preferred fiction or simplified readers. However, this did not tally with the reply to the question about what they mostly read (as opposed to prefer to read), where 67% listed fiction.

READING HABIT ACQUISITION AND USE IDENTIFIED BY INTERVIEW

100 students — rather less than 10% of the student body — were randomly selected in 1981 and asked questions relating to how they acquired the reading habit, what language they were taught to read in, who taught them to read, and what books they enjoyed when young. The interviewer also enquired about the current use of reading in the university — asking whether novels were read, whether the library was often used to work in, and whether students thought they read enough.

Most students questioned started to read at the age of 7, the year they are likely to have started going to school. (Four appeared to be very late starters, learning to read after the age of 12: if correct, it is remarkable they were able to enter the University at all. It is not known if these four were mature students).

Nearly 80% of the students started to read in English. Since most primary schooling is in English this is not surprising, but it is most unlikely that English is the mother tongue of any of the students interviewed. 15% first read in Pidgin, and none at all gave the other nominal lingua franca, Hiri Motu.

It was to be expected that the great majority stated teachers had taught them to read. Surprisingly, 14% listed family relatives (parents, brothers, sisters) as having taught them to read, indicating that some students tend to come from a more literate background than might have been expected. It was not known where the family-taught readers came from, but one would expect it to have been the coastal areas because of their longer contact with the outside world.

Early reading material unsurprisingly was very largely school books for reading. The influence of the missions could be seen in 8% listing religious books as the first reading material.

More than half the students interviewed thought they were able to read by themselves between the ages of 8 and 10. This appeared to show, in comparison with the responses to the first question, a three year period in which the art of independent reading was mastered.

The responses to the question about the kind of book enjoyed when young were to be expected. Significantly, however, the answers appeared to be very similar for the survey of current (i.e., adult) reading preferences. Most students currently enjoyed simplified readers, comics, fiction and adventure; only fairy tales fell out of the preferred list.

Significantly, 47% of the students questioned said that they were never set tests or quizzes by their lecturers on the textbooks for their courses of study. Some courses

listed in the university handbook at this stage had no listed textbooks, and it was recognised by students that a knowledge of set texts in certain courses did not have to be demonstrated. Since some students clearly interpreted course notes to be textbooks, it would seem that about half the student body ignored any published material in relation to their course subjects, and in fact only read lecturer-produced handouts. This aspect of reading habits is touched upon in ELT Document No. 109 *Study Modes and Academic Development of Overseas Students* (1980) (in relation to overseas students taking postgraduate courses in Britain) where Price notes, "It is generally acknowledged in engineering that a student with good lecture notes will probably pass his exams without reading." In the same volume, Brew (in dealing with responses of overseas students to different teaching styles at the University of Essex) comments that "many (students) were unused to learning from reading' in relation to the Open University course in electrical engineering, but adds that this was true of overseas and British students alike.

The library appeared to be used by only 40% of the students more than three times a week. Given its central position, and the attractiveness of its relatively cool, quiet, and spacious interior, it was surprising the library was not used more often, even as a place of relaxation. 6% of the students said they made daily use of the library and 6% appeared never to use it at all: these were the stated extremes of library use by students. However, relatively low library use, though in fact a reflection of the fairly practical nature of the courses studied in the university, may also be a reflection of the low emphasis put on professional reading by some lecturers in their courses. Nevertheless, when students did go to the library it was in nearly three-quarters of the cases because they needed to consult books or periodicals in relation to their studies.

The most disturbing of the findings was in the responses to the question which asked students if they thought they read enough (3). In spite of relatively low library use, little testing on course texts and (as known from the first survey) relatively little non-course-related reading, 62% of students questioned thought they read enough for their courses, and 75% thought they read enough outside their courses. They were in other words fairly complacent about their breadth of reading both generally and professionally, whereas the statistics showed this complacency lacked justification.

ACTUAL LIBRARY USE: LOANS

Statistics were obtained on the loan of books from the library. This was perhaps the most reliable indicator of actual use of the bookstock, though it was of course not completely reliable. Some books being on special reserve might not be taken from the library, and the use of these books was not investigated. Reference books can obviously only be consulted in the library, and some specialised materials cannot be borrowed. However, a book actually borrowed is likely to be read, or at least consulted.

The figures on borrowing are only significant when the overall student-staff figures are borne in mind. Student numbers fluctuate, going down as the academic year progresses. In September 1981, there were 1,128 full and part-time students. By the end of that semester the figure appeared to be 966 full-time and 75 part-time students, a total of 1,041. At 31 July 1981 the total number of staff employed by the university (permanent, contract, short-term and temporary) was 730, of which 309 were local

employees/estate workers, secretarial support staff and junior administration services staff, and 202 academic staff (not including technical, library audio-visual, senior administrative and computer staff).

Two checks during term were made of new library loans to students, staff, families, and others (mostly outside readers) during one week in 1981. (Some staff families might have borrowed under the name of a staff member, and so the figures obtained might not entirely reflect the real situation.) In the first check, students borrowed 472 books, staff 230, families 47 and others 101. The numbers of persons borrowing were not recorded: while some may have borrowed several books, others may have borrowed none at all. 27% of all borrowings were from the fiction section: 18% of student borrowings were in fiction, whereas 40% of staff borrowings were fiction. 138 non-fiction books were borrowed in one week by staff.

The second check on library loans to students, staff, families and others for a week during term showed overall borrowings to be slightly down, as well as borrowings by students and staff. The conclusion reached from the first check — that a significant percentage of overall borrowings was in the fiction section — was reinforced in the second, and this was markedly so among staff. Whereas just under 25% of the student body borrowed at least one book, only just over 10% of the total staff borrowed one; and of the 78 staff borrowing a book that week (less than half the number of academic staff alone), 44, (or 56%) borrowed a work of fiction, compared to 17.5% of the student borrowings in fiction in the same period. It should be added that there exists a small public library in the town of Lae, but this was little used by university students or staff, partly because of the distance of the city from the campus, and partly because of the small bookstock in the town library. There were two shops selling books in the town (neither was exclusively a bookshop), both with a very limited range and high prices. Distortions were to be expected in the analysis-by-department of borrowings, since particular assignments might be set by service department lecturers to students in differing professional departments. Of some interest was the breakdown of loans to staff by department, and a comparison with their academic and technical establishment. Staff in some departments presumably had large personal libraries, or obtained and updated most of their professional knowledge through periodicals.

USE OF PERIODICALS IN THE LIBRARY

It is sometimes held that in a technological institution, staff — and presumably therefore students — keep in touch with their subject more through journals than through books, and this statement is used to justify a large and increasingly costly expenditure on journals. There is unfortunately no certain way of knowing whether a journal is actually read or not. Journals in the university cannot be borrowed from the library, and so are read, if at all, in it. It was not possible to man a watch on periodical use for all the times the library was open over a specific continuous period, so a series of random checks on different days and at different times was made, and a record of findings kept.

At no time were more than 2 staff members or students consulting periodicals, and in the 32 times observations were made during a month-long period, in all only 5 staff members (not always different) and 13 students were seen consulting periodicals. However, 17 staff consulted newspapers, and 104 students did likewise. There was

little physical evidence therefore that periodicals were much used by staff or students during term time for professional purposes, and no indication that staff directed students to read particular journals of relevance to their area of study. It is to be doubted, therefore, if much use is made of the 1,100 periodicals received by the library.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS REGARDING LIBRARY USE

Only modest use was made by students of the library's resources, though the facility of air-conditioned quiet was appreciated, particularly as examination time approached. Although the library of the university is a significant resource — with current bookstock at approximately 40,000 titles (the number of volumes is 48,000) and with an increase of about 7,500 titles a year — library use by university staff and students as a whole seems meagre. Presumably, most at some stage made use of the reference section, but there was no way of checking this. The fiction section was by far the most popular for staff and students alike, though staff appeared to make relatively heavier use of it than students.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS REGARDING READING HABITS

The most unexpected fact revealed by this investigation was that staff, both academic and administrative, appeared to use the university library relatively little. From the weekly loan figures it would seem that, even if the non-academic staff never used the library at all, only about one non-fiction book a week was being borrowed, and presumably read, by academic staff. (The figures could however to a certain extent be explained away; apart from personal bookstocks, some staff might make great use of inter-library loans, which did not appear in the statistics obtained.) The matter of visible example is important here. In a country without a book-learning tradition, or a tradition of books, it might have encouraged students to read more if staff themselves could have been seen to attach importance to reading. The point is arguable, but in the circumstances it was hardly surprising to find the students in the institution reading relatively little, the majority one book or less a month, and that usually a work of fiction. It was to be expected that the reading habits of students were likely to be reflected in their grasp of their specialist subjects.

In a country where literacy is a relatively new phenomenon and where the reading habit has to be fostered because it does not pre-exist, staff need both to require and encourage wide reading in their students. Although not universally true, students in some parts of the world are not inclined to read attentively unless it is known that there will be a check on their reading, in the form of a quiz, a test or examination, or planned integration of required reading in lectures, seminars and tutorials. Little required reading seemed to go on in the University and some courses appeared to have no required texts at all.

One of the factors undoubtedly influencing poor reading habits was that students on the whole considered reading as a chore — and not a pleasurable, informative activity. There can be no doubt that reading some texts is a far from pleasurable activity, and students might perhaps be forgiven if they prefer to read a comic rather than a ponderous tome on (say) macro-economic theory, where they understand little of the terminology or the complex language in which it is expressed. A number of prescribed textbooks seemed to combine difficulty of subject and language to an unusual and unwarrantable degree.

WAYS TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

There can be no doubt from what has been said that there is a problem relating to the lack of a reading habit at the university level in Papua New Guinea, and it seems likely to be a problem in many other third world countries, particularly those where the oral tradition remains strong. The students read relatively little, often only under compulsion, and reading is associated with work rather than with pleasure. Those who do read for pleasure tend to read fiction for preference (there is nothing exceptional or wrong about this of course), but in Papua New Guinea the concept of extending one's intellectual frontiers through reading is still in its infancy.

There seem to be four obvious ways in which positive steps can be taken to improve the situation. The simplest is for subject lecturers to make sure that course texts are actually read — by giving short quizzes on particular sections of the set books, dealing with some sections in extenso, incorporating prescribed reading into classroom presentation, or writing examination questions involving knowledge of the text. In Papua New Guinea some lecturers do this, and find the time spent worthwhile.

Second, in the Department of Language's compulsory English courses, the requirement of regular book reports has been introduced (this is described in detail in Smithies 1982). The number of reports varies according to the lecturer, but usually eight reports are expected during the academic year. Four are on professional texts and four on novels. Lists are drawn up of simply-written professional texts, usually with the help of the professional department, as well as novels likely to interest the students. These are only suggestions for reading, and students are not limited to books on the list. A model is provided of a report on both a professional book and a novel. Many students admit later that they find reading these books interesting, and they would not have read them if they had not been forced to write about them.

Further, greater care in textbook selection is needed. Advanced college texts produced for native speakers of English are unlikely to be fully understood by students in a country where English is rarely even their second language. Basic texts need to be basic, both in context and language. If linguistically simple texts do not exist, they need to be written, and publishers who bear in mind the reading levels of the reader are rendering a useful service to third world university students. (It is not suggested here that such students should indefinitely be given simplified texts; but in the early years of university studies in particular, some assistance has to be given in respect of difficult texts.)

The fourth area where reading can be promoted is through greater use of the university library's facilities. In Papua New Guinea, apart from library tours, a quiz in the form of a fact hunt is given at the beginning of the first two years of instruction by lecturers in the Language Department, requiring students to find their way about the shelves. They have to locate facts which send them to the professional books on open shelves, professional books on reserve, professional periodicals on open shelves, past professional periodicals, books in the reference section, the Papua New Guinea collection, the fiction section, and materials in the audio-visual section. The Library provides regular art exhibitions, map displays, photographic shows and so on; but possibly more could be done to make the library a still more active focal point of university life.

In spite of recent technological advances, it is most unlikely that the need to read will ever disappear. It is therefore the duty of a university to see that students are both encouraged and required to read and use books. While the practical nature of technology is not disputed, students on graduation need to be fully aware citizens able to keep up with change in their specialist fields; and to do this must have acquired and sustained the reading habit. There is little evidence, from the investigations described in this article, that such habits are successfully being acquired in Papua New Guinea.

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